

The Search for Self and Space by Indian Dalit Joseph Macwan and African American Richard Wright

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“Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion”

These lines by T S Eliot in his poem “*The Hollow men*” fit in drawing the actual picture of the existentialism of the marginalized groups. These groups may be given physical area where they are allowed to live in ghetto but they are not offered any space to breathe freely in. They are entitled as individuals but have no individual identity. Their search for self and space sets in motion from the moment when they realize their marginalized condition.

Marginality is a blot on humanity as a universal phenomenon. Marginality may have different forms but it exists globally. As R. Bhongle writes:

What is Marginality? The term applies to those areas of human interactions and activities which had only peripheral values, which were relegated to and looked upon as irrelevant and insignificant to the mainstream interest, and which appeared occasionally either to entertain or as an object of pity and sympathy in the so-called mainstream literature. (25)

Marginality and suffering result into the search for the self-esteem and self-establishment. To discuss the theme of search for self and space, here this presentation compares and contrasts two texts by two marginalized writers from two different nations: *The Angliyat* by Indian Dalit Joseph Macwan and *The Outsider* by African American Richard Wright.

India is a country which boasts of centuries-old traditions and culture. It's the reason why it is called “Incredible” India. Though it is considered incredible in many ways today, it has had its share of dark moments. It has a very long history about the suffering and mal-practices in the name of religions and morality, in the name of socialism and ethics. One of the major draw backs of the country, even today, is the caste system ‘*varna vyavastha*’. The caste system was established in the name of religion and enforced with the help of law books such as the *Manusmriti* and the support of kings who considered themselves as upholders of religion - ‘*dharma*’. The force of tradition, superstition, religious beliefs, fear of punishment, the Law of Karma - ‘*karma siddhant*’ also played an important role in its success. The caste system was based on birth. People inherited caste from their parents and passed it on to their children. They had no right to change their caste as long as they practised the Vedic religion.

The four main castes, recognized by the traditional Hindu society based primarily on hereditary occupation, are mentioned below:

Brahmins: They were the priestly class, who were entitled to study of the Vedas-the Hindu scriptures, perform rites and rituals for themselves and for others and obliged to

observe the sacraments. They were believed to be the “middle” men between gods and ordinary men.

Kshatriyas: They were the warrior class, who were commanded (by tradition) to protect the people.

Vaishyas: They were the merchant and peasant classes, who were expected to tend cattle, offer sacrifices, trade, lend money and cultivate the land.

Shudras: They were the labour class, whose only duty was to serve the other three castes. They were not required to observe any Vedic rituals or *samskaras* except a few. They were not allowed to study the Vedas or even hear the sacred chants. They were not allowed to eat food in the company of higher castes or marry higher caste women.

It has been deep rooted impact of so called *varna vyavastha* that in the beginning of the 20th century, Dr B R Ambedkar, a highly educated and renowned Dalit social reformer, was not allowed to learn Sanskrit on the ground of untouchability. When he was appointed in the Military Department of Sayaji Rao Maharaj of Baroda in 1917 after pursuing higher education in the famous Columbia University, USA, the caste Hindu peons threw official files towards him instead of handing them over, due to the fear of being polluted by touching him.

Just like Ambedkar, many ‘untouchable’ scholars and writers believe that untouchability was and still is a stain on the Hindu religion. Rajesh Joshi, a well known and sensitive Hindi poet writes,

After my death,
When it's written that I was a Hindu,
Write clearly that I was very ashamed (Gupta 152).

It is what Nationalist leader and devout Hindu Mahatma Gandhi also feels in this regard when he says,

..untouchability is a curse that is eating into the vitals of Hinduism, and I often feel that unless we take due precaution and remove this from our midst, Hinduism itself is in danger of destruction (Hingorani 159).

These untouchables are also called as dalits. The root word of this adjective dalit is ‘dal’. The meanings given to ‘dalit’ in the dictionaries are: burst, split, scattered, dispersed, broken, torn as under, destroyed, crushed. All these English words sum up the exact position of the Indian Untouchables. They are crushed and cramped and made mince-meat by the upper Hindu castes literally. These dalits have always tried to quest for their own identity as human beings. Their pathos and turmoils, their suffering and exploitations, their reactions and consequences are reflected through their literary expressions.

Dalit literature is experience based. This ‘*anubhava*’ (experience) takes precedence over ‘*anumana*’ (speculation). Thus to dalit writers, history is not illusionary or unreal. Authenticity and truthfulness have become hallmarks of dalit literature. These writers make use of the language of the out-castes and under-privileged in Indian society. Shame, anger, sorrow and indomitable hope are the stuff of dalit literature. Because of the anger against the age-old oppression, the expression of the dalit writers has become sharp and sensitive. These writers make a fervent plea for a complete overhaul of the society. That’s why Sharankumar Limbale said, “Dalit literature considers human as a centre. There is no pain of ‘I’ but

pain of ignored society as a whole” (Gupta 15). The literary dalits present their search for identity.

This new branch of literature first took existence in Maharashtra but later on, in Gujarat, it has sprouted its wings slowly but steadily. Joseph Macwan is considered as one of the pioneer Gujarati dalit writers. He was born in 1936 in Kheda district. He had to do back breaking hard work since his childhood. During his early years he had to suffer from many family disputes along with economical and social upheavals. As a *chamaar* – a very low caste, living on the dead animals’ leathers – by birth, Joseph Macwan has himself experienced suffering and pathos of life as it is lived by any down trodden. In his later life, he converted to Christianity with the hope to get social and cultural acceptance at least as a human being. Still Macwan was deeply rooted in his culture of oppression. His position as an alterity remains as a weapon to outpour his own struggle for the self. He wrote his first story in 1952 which was published under a pen name. From 1956 onwards, he started writing short stories in an unorganized manner. From 1964 to 1979, he almost abandoned writing. But literature wouldn’t abandon him. Under the influence of Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, he again took up the pen as a weapon and started writing seriously, this time with much vigour and spirit. His *Vyatha Na Vitako* gained him not only fame and name but also establishment him as a very mature writer. Later in 1986, he gave two novels: *Angaliyat* and *Lakshman Ni Agnipriksha* and his collection of stories *Sadhana Ni Aradhana*.

In Maharashtra, dalit writers have mostly written poems, dramas and essays but have not attempted to write a novel till date. *Angaliyat* is considered as the first dalit novel written in any language in India. In 1989, this novel received the Kendriya Sahitya Akademi Award. It was skillfully translated by Rita Kothari from Gujarati into English as *The Stepchild*, and published by Oxford University Press (OUP) in 2004. It has the honour of being the first Gujarati novel translated into English and published by OUP.

Angaliyat works on four levels. It is a gripping tale of love, heroism, humiliation, revenge and death. It is a vividly coloured picture of the lives of two neighbouring villages in the Charotar district of central Gujarat. It is a document of the politics of the pre- and post-Independence years, as seen from the perspective of the downtrodden; and finally, it is an account of the struggle of one dalit community against its upper-caste oppressors, spurred on by two opposing ideologies, the Gandhian and the Ambedkarite.

Fourteen thousand kilometers away from India, the most powerful nation in the world, America has also witnessed the same phenomenon of suffering amongst a marginalized group. If the dalits were victims of castism, the African American community suffered unimaginable oppression under the guise of racism.

As the dominance on dalits prevails in India, the repression on Black Americans is seen in America. In India, this dominance is based on the birth which is not in human hands. In the same way, in America, this repression is based on the colour of the skin, which is also out of the human reach. In the name of racism, these Black Americans were victimized. Robert Blauner believes, racism is “a principle of social domination by which a group seen as inferior or different in alleged biological characteristics is exploited, controlled and oppressed socially and physically by a super ordinate group” (Blauner 26). Another critic of African American literature, Tzvetan Todorov puts forward the definition of racism,

“Racism” is the name given to a type of behaviour which consists in the display of contempt or aggressiveness toward other people on account of

physical differences (other than those of sex) between them and oneself (Todorov 370).

Their identity has travelled from “coloured” to “Negro”, from “Negro” to “Black”, from “Black” to “Afro-American” and now from “Afro-American” to “African American”. These people were forcefully alienated from their own history, faith and culture.

Protesting against white racism, the Black people started singing their sagas of suffering and oppression, expressing their poetics of depression and devastation. Though the American literature is much older and wide in its scope, accepted worldwide and universally praised, African American writers have also contributed in it through their experiences and expressions, imaginations and impressions.

This grief-stricken literature is observable when the African American writers pour their grief out of their hearts which were full of many wretched experiences of slavery. In a poem “On Liberty and Slavery” by George M Horton, such troubled voices can be heard as

Alas ! and am I born for this
To wear this slavish chain ?
Deprived of all created bliss,
Through hardship, toil and pain. (Huges 18)

In spite of having positioned on the threshold, the African American writers have given their untold voices a new identity. These sufferers have given voices to their search for space. These writers expressed their emotions powerfully not only in their qualitative essence but also in their quantity of work. One of these writers was Richard Wright who has tried to de-mystify blackness through his literary world. Richard Nathaniel Wright was born on 4 Sept 1908 in a poor illiterate sharecropper’s house near Natchez. Since his childhood, he suffered pain and agonies. During his early age, he had to experience social and family disturbances. At the age of 16, he had published his first short story, “The Voodoo of Hell’s Half-Acre,” in three parts in the magazine *Southern Register* in 1924. Later in his life, he began to read contemporary American literature as well as commentary by H L Mencken, which struck him with particular force.

In the young age, he shifted from one city to other and then from America to Europe. As a sufferer, he himself felt the urge of being noticed. He had the quest for self recognition. His literary career was launched when his short story collection, *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938) won first prize for the *Story* magazine contest. In 1940, his book *Native Son* was published, which is considered as the first bestselling novel and the first Book-of-the-Month Club selection by an African American writer. His autobiography, *Black Boy*, came out in 1945. Although the US Senate denounced *Black Boy* as “obscene”, it became a best seller book. In 1946 Wright was invited to France. After his return to the US, he thought to settle down in Paris forever. Married to a white woman and living in the North, he still was unable to buy an apartment as he was a Black man. His search for physical space is also symbolic with his search for mental space. He moved to Paris in 1947 where he spent the rest of his life. In Paris, he became associated with Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir. They may have influenced his gravitation towards forms of existentialism noticeable in his 1953 novel *The Outsider*, about the search of a self-conscious black intellectual for identity.

He is considered as one of the most powerful Black writers of America as Jerry H.

Bryant said, “Wright is the contemporary black freedom movement’s prophet, with his passionate attacks against the sins of White America and his patriarchal criticism of his own people” (Bryant 691).

Wright has personally experienced suffering and marginality, meaninglessness and uselessness of life. He depicted his experiences in most of his novels. At a very subtle level, the theme of loneliness is found in most of his works. A sense of loneliness is the result of being forced to remain aloof socially. Arnold Rampersad opines, “His most memorable narratives are haunted by a profound sense of loveless-ness, homelessness, and alienation, as well as by a related sense of black American culture as spiritually and culturally emaciated” (4).

Literary expressions by both the authors have the saga of suffering, the quest for the self, the urge to be given them space as human beings. With the background of a marginalized caste, they have depicted their existential identity in their novels.

Angaliyat by Joseph Macwan has remained an inspiration for the researcher to look deeply at the complex world of Indian dalits. In the novel, the dalit characters are struggling for their identity. Their anger, agony and protests are presented by the author effectively. *Angaliyat* is a documentary of Dalits’ suffering and their reactions to it as Joseph Macwan himself saw and experienced in his life. Macwan described the harsh reality without any bitterness but with fragrance of creativity. Bhagwatikumar Sharma, a renowned Gujarati author says, in this novel, Macwan “describes fire but doesn’t harm. He wants to extinguish the fire.” (Sharma 15)

Angaliyat is a saga which elaborates two opposite situations: the first one, in which most of the dalit community members are ready to accept the otherness in their own country and the second one, in which they wake up to protest, to challenge this unjustified otherness. The element of this protest has been in Macwan’s life and so his characters in the novel are drawn with the same colours of protest. This is the tale of struggle between two different communities of one particular region. One community is well-equipped, alert and powerful whereas the other one which is confronting this community is downtrodden, deprived of all.

While *Angaliyat* is full of traumatic situations and turning points, *The Outsider* has also woven themes like racial prejudices, political suppression and existential crisis. *The Outsider*, as an existential novel, deals with many parallel themes. The novel is a complex master narrative to show American racism in raw and ugly terms. The kind of racism that Wright knew and experienced, a racism from which most black people of his own time could not escape, remained the central element in his fiction. The novel begins, evolves and ends with the possibilities and opportunities given to a black man for reclaiming his visibility in the world surrounding him, the world which has never noticed his presence. The black presence - physically, mentally, emotionally or politically - was neither acknowledged nor received by the white Americans.

The protagonist of the novel, named with great symbolism, Cross Damon, represents the 20th century man in frenzied pursuit of freedom and in search of self identity. The name itself suggests that the word ‘Cross’ belongs to the holy religious essence, the pious cross, while ‘Damon’ stands for man’s darker insight, evil. For any man, it has to be believed that he must have both shades of life as a coin has two sides.

In *Angaliyat*, the protagonist Teeha saves the honour of Methi, but none from her

village, even from her own community, is ready to stand by Teeha. Macwan writes in the very beginning of the novel when Teeha fights to save the honour of the village girl in this manner, "If anyone offered shelter to Teeha after his fight with the upper castes, they would set the entire *mohalla* on fire. Afraid of this, no one dared even to greet Teeha although he had rescued a young girl of the community from disgrace" (Macwan 18).

The dalits are in no state to protest. They are not even ready to think of it. They have accepted their fate in all worst situations. Their conditioned mentality never lets them think beyond their conventionality. When none gives shelter to Teeha after protecting Methi from the Patel youths, Moti, a relative of Methi says to Teeha and his friend Valji: "But you know how it is – first of all our caste is a low one, and then one can't live in water and risk enmity with the crocodile" (Macwan 19).

The most brutal and harsh reality gets exposed here in this point concerning women's molestation. The upper castes don't touch these dalits as they are considered as untouchables but the dalit women are not only touched for sexual satisfaction but repeatedly raped and abused for the sake of pleasure by the upper castes. This is the worst form of exploitation that women had to face at the hands of the higher castes.

Macwan believes that the dalit community itself needs reformation and it needs to shed the load of the evils and so he depicts his beliefs through some individuals who protested against the old fashioned customs, cultural beliefs, rigid mentality, conditioned mind set up etc. Teeha protested not only to change the attitude of the upper castes but also for the cultivation of values in the dalits. He doesn't give '*pretbhojan*' - a feast to the villagers after the death of his mother as it has been a ritual of the community. According to Teeha, some rituals like '*pretbhojan*' have no ground for logical understanding. He is in a way more rational.

In the course of the novel, the theme of search for self identity and quest for freedom is depicted through many characters like Teeha and Methi, Kanku and Daan, and other major characters. Dharendra Mehta, a critic of Joseph Macwan, says, "*Angaliyat* is a tale of men who are struggling to maintain their identity as human beings" (Mehta 231). In order to protest against intense casteism, the dalits have to willingly be ready to lay down their lives. Teeha and his group are prepared for the ultimate sacrifice. After the death of Teeha, Bhavaankaka proclaims, "Don't blame the swaraj, Master, blame the human heart. Till Ram inhabits the human heart, Ramrajya will be a distant dream. And I feel the death of a single Valji or a single Teeha cannot bring that *rajya*. Many more Valjis and Teehas will have to die like this. Our eyes will not open otherwise." (229)

Teeha, the individual protestor, has strength of soul and body and makes the other dalits ready for the protest also. On behalf of him, his best friend Valji tells the villagers: "My dear chap, as we wind a cloth round our heads, we have to live now with the shroud on our shoulders....." (42) The dalits also believe that they can't rely on the upper castes in any circumstance as Teeha proclaims openly, "Patel, paado (he-buffalo) and pardhi (hunter) are never to be trusted" (23).

The political leader from the upper castes, Dehlavala Sheth, confidently quells his nephew, Mukhi's fears of a Vankar rebellion. He knows the weakness of the dalit community as well as the strength of their unity so he decides to play his cards tactfully. He says: "If they were united, it would have been difficult for us to live in this village. The day they achieve self-recognition, the sun will set on us." (100)

At the end of the novel, when Teeha dies, it is neither the end of a person nor of a protest but in fact it suggests a beginning of a new era. Valji's and Teeha's sacrifices give a new dynamism to the struggle for freedom and self esteem among the Dalits. Teeha's death motivates the other dalits to continue with the crusade. Dr Ratilal Rohit, a critic said, "The death of Teeha after the sacrifice of Valji is the gift of the Independence to the Dalits" (Rohit 267). Dalpat Chauhan believes, "The novel gives the first hero to the Dalits" (Chauhan 68).

Through behaviours, psyche and manners, beliefs and conducts, the characters show the world how tall they are. Rita Kothari believes that, "In an interesting and paradoxical way, the assertion of a dalit identity takes place through physical valour in the men and through 'purity' as far as the women are concerned" (Macwan xxviii). That is why, Umashankar Joshi, a well established and well known writer of Gujarati literature, told Joseph Macwan that, "You haven't popularized *Angaliyat* but *Angaliyat* has popularized you" (Joshi 205).

The existential crisis, the search for the self is seen in the lead character Cross Damon in *The Outsider*. Being a black, he is marginalized socially. But being a poor husband of a threatening wife, he is more marginalized emotionally and psychologically. His wife Gladys was not ready to allow him a little space for his own individual freedom. He didn't have a glimpse of freedom even in his own sphere. Wright, in this regard, writes, "And he knew that freedom was the last thing on earth that Gladys would ever grant him" (Wright 37).

His being marginalized is obvious not only in the terms of racial behaviour but in the terms of existential identity also. Thus marginality is experienced by Cross Damon, socially, racially and psychologically too. As a marginal black in America, Damon feels sidelined by the whites and as being ignored by his wife, he is isolated and detached from the general life around him. At this junction, he desires to be free from all illusions and conflicts of his life.

In a train accident, he is reported dead and so he sets out to create his own identity. This search for the identity compels him to commit four murders and ends in his despair and violent death. He gets a chance to create himself anew. He must invent, he thinks, not only his future, but also a past to fit with his present. He was extremely unhappy with his own existence. To highlight his existential crisis, Wright writes, "He was without a name, a past, a future; no promises or pledges bound him to those about him. He had to become human before he could mingle again with people" (Wright 175). Yoshinobu Hakutani writes the same observation as, "*The Outsider* represents a version of existentialism in which human action is viewed as the result of an individual's choice and will. To Wright, the individual's action must be assertive and, if need be, aggressive." (Hakutani 165)

The novel deals with the dilemma imposed by different political ideologies. Damon's merger with the Communist Party is dangerous for his new identity too. About the novel, a well known critic James Hart believes that *The Outsider* is "a sensational novel of a black man's life in Chicago and New York City and his fatal involvement with the Communist Party" (Hart 850). Having rejected religion openly and politics secretly, having committed murders for being a free man, having felt the chaos in his life in each situation, Cross keeps his last hope on love. The young Damon's desire to free himself from such bondage is closely related to his inability to love any black woman, as shown by his relationship with his wife Gladys or his pregnant mistress Dot. The only woman he loves is the white woman Eva, the wife of his Communist friend Gil Blount. To him the presence of his love for Eva means the ultimate purpose of his new existence.

At the end of the novel, after being trapped in his self-made identity and after Eva's suicide for his disloyalty to her, Cross Damon replies at the time of his death: "Nothing The search can't be done alone, . . . Never alone . . . Alone a man is nothing . . . Man is a promise that he must never break . . ." (Wright 585). This makes Damon a perfect example of an existentialist character. Yoshinobu Hakutani describes Damon as "an existentialist actively in search of an essence in the meaningless existence, ..." (Hakutani 165).

Political enslavement in both the texts is visible too. Dehlawala Sheth in *Angaliyat* and the Communist Party members in *The Outsider* show their hypocrisy get maximum benefits from the outcastes. Dehlawala Sheth prevents all from helping Teeha who needs medical treatment at the end of the novel *Angaliyat*. Thus he takes his revenge and reveals his true colours. On the other hand, in *The Outsider*, white politicians try to convince Cross Damon that they have been working for the upliftment of the Blacks in the USA but in reality they have not been able to overcome their inherent racist conditioning.

Search for identity is a remarkable characteristic of existentialist approach. The very common and striking theme of *The Outsider* is the meaning of individual freedom. Cross himself believes that everybody must be free. This has to be his only vision and mission. The author describes his passion in this manner, "That all men were free was the fondest and deepest conviction of his life" (Wright 111).

On the other hand, in *Angaliyat*, one can witness the presence of exploitation and, due to it; the presence of existentialism. Most of the dalits face the same situation as faced by the Blacks. Teeha, Bhavaankaka and other characters experience their isolation from the main stream society. This isolation is imposed upon them by so-called upper caste people. The dalits are confined in a very restrained group. They are groping in the darkness for their shadows. They are constantly searching for the stability and acceptance of their humanness.

From the very beginning of the novel *The Outsider*, Cross Damon is in quest for his identity. His search results into his murder. He is killed by Communists mainly because they fear his independence and detachment. Before he dies, he answers the key question posed by the novel, about the meaning of freedom to the individual. Cross declares, "Alone man is nothing" (Wright 585). He continues, "I wish I had some way to give the meaning of my life to others..... To make a bridge from man to man.... We must find some way of being good to ourselves.... Man is all we've got" (Wright 585).

In *Angaliyat*, the entire dalit community is, in a way, an '*angliyat*', a step child towards who little heed is supposed. The dalits are considered to be outsiders. They are not even given respect as a part of the society. In *The Outsider*, Cross Damon lives his entire life as if he were an outsider. He was given a space as an *angaliyat* by white society. He actually doesn't want to accept his coarse reality and in its response, he hates to be in that chaos. In order to be out of that chaos, he is ever ready to escape and find more chaotic situation in which he remains an outsider. No circle includes him as an insider. Maryemma Graham describes, "Damon is racially outside (a black man living outside of a dominant white racist society), spiritually outside (an atheist living outside of Christianized Western society), materially outside (a postal worker who is deeply in debt), and emotionally outside (involved in a marriage-family situation which he abores)." (Wright xxiv-xxv)

Both the authors, having experienced marginality and suffering - psychologically, socially, and politically - have drawn the sketches of their own experiences with the use of words. Their literary expressions are revolt against oppressions which they experience in their lives and which they watch in their people too. Whether the victims are the Blacks of

America or the Dalits of India, they have to suffer due to their place in the margin. They are not allowed any space in the page. About the African American writing, Waghmare notes, "African history has given them a full page, but American history has given only small and narrow margin on its page" (Waghmare 21). This is true not only for the African American literature but also for the Dalit literature as the dalits have also been kept aside forcefully from the main stream by the upper castes.

With these traumatic situations in mind, dalits in India and blacks in America in general and both the authors Indian Dalit Joseph Macwan and African American Richard Wright and their literary characters in particular feel their urge to be free. Their identity has to be redrawn. Their uniqueness has to be re-sung. Their importance has to be regained. Their self esteem has to be re-established. Their search for space has to be given importance. Their quest for self has to be respected. For these purposes, both the authors have shown the way. In their literature of marginality, 'we-ness' is unique and common, as J M Waghmare notes, "Their writings are autobiographies of their communities. A strong feeling of 'we-ness' is writ large in their books. This is a peculiar phenomenon to be found in the literature of the marginalized and oppressed groups" (22).

The saga of their hopeful and constructive protest, of their search for self and space is sung by a poet Kanwal Bharti as

The freedom struggle we fight
Will be continuous till the day
When the Sun of our share
Rises for our withered plants. (Gupta 79)

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